

INDEXA



Summer 2010

www.indexa.org

Special Issue

A non-profit organization for the enhancement of amateur radio, worldwide peace, and friendship
Daily Information Session — 14.236 MHz @ 23:30z

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA

(or “Tales from the South Pacific” with apologies to James A. Michener)

By Chris Chapman VK3QB

Copyright© 2009



Introduction

Late in 2008 I received an email from a friend pointing me to a website which was looking for operators to travel to Lord Howe Island in 2009 for a DXpedition. Ever since I can remember I have wanted to go on a DXpedition; the travel, adventure, new experiences and new friends all coupled in with the fascination of the hobby of kings; Amateur Radio (late nights, antenna erections, pileups and rare DX)! This opportunity was perfect; it lined up with my personal circumstances—timing, availability and being reasonably close to home it did not require a long-haul flight. Also, and perhaps most importantly, the DXpedition organising group, the Oceania DX Group (ODXG) was enthusiastic to have “first timers” join some of the more experienced operators for this trip.

And so the DXpedition began to take form under the guidance of the ODXG and DXpedition leader, Bill VK4FW. A diverse team was assembled comprising 16 operators (along with four partners) from three continents and five countries. We also had great diversity in the skills and experience of the team members, with some being die-hard DXpeditioners, and some, like myself, being DXpedition virgins. We had computer experts, antennae experts and folk with extensive operational experience on our three modes of operation; SSB, CW and RTTY. The callsign VK9LA was already allocated to ODXG and preliminary agreements were in place for two suitable sites on the island.

It is more than fair to say that all 16 operators shared a common set of desires:

- Have fun;
- Work lots of DX – play lots of radio;
- Make new friends and
- Experience an exotic location

VK9LA promised to offer just that, and more.

(Continued on page 2)

inside... K7BV returns to San Andres y Providencia, June 9 through June 23, 2010

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 1)

This story is a brief account of this DXpedition from the eyes and ears of a first timer. The team was made up of the following operators: Tony IZ3ESV, San K5YY, Bob N2OO, Lance N2OZ, Stan SQ8X, Peter SQ9DIE, Victoria SV2KBS, Tex VK1TX, Luke VK3HJ, John VK4IO, Catherine VK4VCH, Chris VK5CP, Jay W5SL, John VK5PO, Bill VK4FW and myself, Chris VK3QB.

Lord Howe Island

Lord Howe Island (LHI) is located in the South Pacific, approximately 700 km east of mainland Australia, and is widely regarded as the most beautiful island in the western south Pacific region. It is the closest island getaway from Sydney and is less than two hours flying time from Sydney and Brisbane. It is one of just four island groups to be inscribed on the World Heritage List for



The VK9LA Team takes a moment from serving the deserving to break out the INDEXA colors.

the global significance of its natural beauty and heritage. There are approximately 350 permanent residents and no more than 400 tourists on the island at any one time. These limitations are largely set down by the World Heritage Listing. guidelines.

Flights have strict baggage limitations which are governed largely by the aircraft used to service the island, the de Havilland Canada Dash-8, seating about 32 passengers and allowing only 14kgs of checked baggage per passenger. The runway is likely the limiting factor here, as it is only 1005 metres in length, located on the flattest section of the island which is probably only 1,100 metres wide! The airport was constructed by Australian Army Surveyors in 1975, prior to that the island was serviced by flying

boats.

Those with some experience of DXpeditions will quickly realize that these weight limitations would have made any



Location of Lord Howe Island

serious DXpedition with 16 operators a virtual impossibility. Hence the ODXG arranged for most of the equipment to be shipped to the island one month before the event. All power (240V AC 50Hz) is provided by diesel generators on the island, and for the

(Continued on page 3)

The *INDEXA Newsletter* is a quarterly publication of the International DX Association.

Copyright 2010

Editor & Publisher

John Scott, K8YC; 16212 Walcot Lane
Cornelius, NC 28031 USA
jascott@mi-connection.com

Distribution & Circulation

Bill Jennings, W4UNP; P. O. Box 123
Catawba, SC 29704 USA
w4unp@comporium.net

Send change-of-address information and membership applications to Secretary-Treasurer, Bill Jennings, W4UNP.



Address general correspondence to President Gary Dixon, K4MQG, at
gdixon@comporium.net.

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 2)

most part this was stable and reliable.

The VK9LA Operation

Arrival and Setup

The DXpedition was to officially begin on 23rd March 2009, but Bill VK4FW was able to fly onto LHI a couple of days earlier. This gave me the chance to work Bill from my home QTH once he had established a basic station set-up, and I was very pleased to be the first in the log with VK9LA – both on SSB and CW on 30 metres.

Over the course of the next two days the remaining 15 operators and some partners arrived on the island. The flight from Sydney was smooth and chatter was predominantly focused on radio matters—as almost half the passengers were the LHI DXpedition crew. The aircraft was a 30 seater Dash-8 and I suspect that our constant banter, laughter and impending excitement provided the rest of the passengers with a curious but entertaining air travel experience. Abnormal people (i.e. 99.9% of the population) simply do not understand or appreciate the wonders of Amateur Radio and DXpeditions!



Luke VK3HJ adjusts the WARC Tri-bander's rotator

required more time and effort than originally planned. First was the 3 element 20mtr beam. This took longer than expected due to space constraints, so the remaining antennae were left until the following day. The SSB Camp worked 20 metres SSB hard the first night. The next day was spent running 20 metres SSB whilst a number of operators worked hard to get the remaining antennae

On arrival at the island we were met by Bill VK4FW who immediately put us to work getting the towers up and beams erected at the Blue Lagoon Lodge.

The team was spread between 2 camps. The Beachcomber Lodge was located at the top of a small hill and operated the CW stations. This became known as the “CW Camp”. About 1 km away from the CW Camp down by the beach was the Blue Lagoon or “SSB Camp”, and this is where we ran the SSB and RTTY stations.

The CW Camp had elevated verticals for 30 and 40 metres each with 42 radials, dipoles for 80 and 160 metres and an R5 vertical, as well as a three element tri-bander on 20, 15 and 10. This camp was, for the most part, fully setup and operational within the first 24 hours.

The SSB Camp re-



John VK4IO launches the 80 metre dipole skyhook.

(Continued on page 4)

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 3)

up and operational.

The VK9LA team had more or less “taken over” these two tourist facilities so were able to get some latitude and cooperation from the respective owners. The owner of the Beach Comber is also a licensed radio operator VK9FLHI and was extremely helpful, providing access to his utility vehicle enabling us to ferry equipment between the two camps.

Of particular interest was John, VK4IO and his “arborist’s tool” – really a super duper sling shot. This device is something to see in action. Within 20 minutes we had the 80 metre dipole up at about 100 feet with one end into a fantastic Norfolk Island Pine and the other into a Silky Oak. Shortly thereafter the 40 metre dipole was up about 85 feet. John then headed up to the CW Camp with Bill and got the 80 and 160 metre antennae up nice and high.

Day to day Operations

ODXG and the more experienced operators made the decision that this would be a very informal DXpedition, and also wanted to provide an opportunity for the less experienced of us to build our skills and confidence. As such, we had no formal operating schedules although some rough patterns developed as the team “found their footings” and preferred bands, modes and shifts began to take form.

Tuesday night I pulled the graveyard shift—my first time on the pointy end of a pileup. What a baptism of fire; forty metres CW. I took over from a very experienced operator (Bob N2OO) who had been working at 30 wpm plus and I dropped to about 20wpm. The first hour I got maybe 20 QSOs. It was a complete zoo. I managed to keep the pileup quite tight and as my ear tuned in the rate increased—the next five hours was a buzz. I finished up at 4am, extremely satisfied but rather exhausted. How does one describe this experience to the uninitiated? It was 6 hours of constant CW “noise”, it sounded like a cacophony of Morse code music but the problem being it was almost impossible to discern individual signals.

The challenging and fun bit was taking control of the pileup—and N2OO and Bill VK4FW had explained this to me in the briefing sessions (I had also read W9KNI Bob Locher’s book “The Complete DXer” prior to the trip which was most instructive and entertaining—a recommended read). However, I did not appreciate just what this all meant until I experienced it first hand. My first hour was spent listening and learning how to break the pileup into manageable chunks—it sounded more like RTTY or PSK31 than CW! Coping strategies included:

- o going split up 2 or 3 KHz. (or more – sometime up/down +/-8Khz)
- o picking the strongest signals first
- o picking signals at the top/bottom end of the pileup
- o calling for certain regions/call areas/prefixes only

QSYing to the other side of my calling frequency – there was always at least one guy waiting for this approach



Chris VK3QB working the CW pileups on 40 metres

and the pileup quickly followed.

By the second hour I had some confidence and had a reasonable control of the pileup – and was very happy to increase the QSO rate from about 20 QSOs in the first hour to about 50 to 60 in the 2nd and 3rd hours. For the uninitiated this is not a fast QSO rate for a DXpedition operator – the more experienced operators were rocketing along at a much faster rate. However, as with most endeavours in life, practice makes perfect, and I found the experience to be fantastic and a load of fun.

The next day I managed to get some intermittent internet access and I couldn't help but check the DX-cluster to see the usual bar-

(Continued on page 5)

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 4)

range of helpful comments and advice.... here are just a few that appeared about the time I took over operation:

- o Joke!! QRSSSSSSSSSSSS. No QSO.
- o Fake. Change in operator style.
- o FINALLY REAL SIGNAL REPORTS!!

There is a lesson to be learned here for those posting spots on the cluster; and also an interesting observation of how a change of operator can be interpreted by those “chasing the DX”. I found it most insightful.

By Wednesday morning (25th March) we had all antennae up with full coverage from 160 metres and all seven stations working at full capacity. Conditions were woeful from late Wednesday afternoon. I did graveyard shift and managed to work only 37 QSOs in 4 hours. It was very hard work and frustrating; I imagine for both ends of the pileups—or lack thereof. Most of other stations did not do much better. These conditions persisted for most of the night and into the next day, and did not start to improve until late Thursday. Dull conditions put a real dent in our ability to get the QSO rate up and put the pressure on for the rest of the trip.

It is worth noting at this point that this DXpedition was arguably held at the absolute sunspot minima, with only 0.7 sunspots (i.e. Not even one!) being observed for the entire month of March. This would largely have accounted for the lack of propagation and activity on the higher bands. It should also be noted that LHI is 12,000 kilometres from North America, 9,500 kilometres from Japan and 16,500 kilometres from Central Europe, (all requiring multi-hop propagation on short path) further exacerbating the impact of these poor con-



John VK5PO working RTTY

ditions on our QSO rates into NA, JA and EU on the higher bands. It would be entirely remiss of me not to make mention of John, VK5PO who almost single-handedly ran the RTTY station and handed out VK9LA to over 2,000 stations. A number of operators who had never worked RTTY before took the opportunity to look over John's shoulder and watch the signals “magically appear” on the computer screen. Here was a per-



Chris VK3QB and Chris VK5CP made the hike to the southern tip of the island. This picture is taken to the Northern end of the island and puts the size of the island into perspective. Mt Gower is the furthest mountain in this picture and rises 875 metres ASL

fect example of an operator fueled on caffeine and RTTY adrenaline!

On the Friday (27th March) Chris VK5CP and I hiked up to Malabar, a hill about 210 metres above sea level on the southern point of the island. We both took the opportunity to work VK9LA as VK3QB/9 and VK5CP/9 respectively on 146.225 FM from the top of Malabar. Most of the remaining team members made the walk over the course of the weekend—well worthwhile a great view from the southern tip of the island up to the north. The adventurous EU guys took a guided tour up the 875 metre Mt Gower, regarded as one of the world's best day walks.

(Continued on page 6)

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 5)

Some of the team entered into the CQ WPX SSB Contest; Multi Two All Band Category. Despite poor conditions we managed a score of 1,884,168 points. This put the VK9LA team in 39th place (or 2nd place for VK—with congrats to VK4KW), which I think the team can be very proud of considering the bulk of our effort and energy was being placed on the DX side of things rather than the contest.

After the first few days we had all settled into a casual routine, and it was very nice not to be pressured, knowing that there would always be someone willing to take over the station when fatigue and/or frustration became overwhelming. Equally so, there was always someone willing to hand the controls over to a fresh operator.

On the Monday evening (30th March) I wandered up to the CW Camp about 11pm and took over from Jay W5SL on 80 metres. Stateside was coming in consistently and after two hours propagation started to drop out and I moved on to the JAs. This will come as no surprise to many, but it's not possible to clear a pileup with JA. However, the JAs are very well mannered and the QSO rate was relatively high for a newcomer. I was very pleased to be averaging about 50-60 QSOs per hour. Propagation moved across HL, UA0 and very slowly into northern EU. I worked quite a few OM and OH but no southern EU was heard. Again, I finished up about 4am and headed back to the SSB Camp after checking in with fellow operators Tony IZ3ESV on 40 metres CW, and Stan SQ8X on 30 metres CW.

About this time LHI was getting hit by the tail end of a cyclone that had been battering northern Australia and we all shared concerns for the Mellish Reef team (George, AA7JV and Tamas HA7RY) who were enroute at that stage to operate VK9GWM. The Mellish Reef team were almost 1,600 kilometres due north of our position which would have made a noticeable difference to both their weather and also propagation paths into JA, EU and NA. Thankfully they made it safely and we heard them on many occasions towards the end of our trip. The winds did cause some concern for our “tower and antenna man” John, VK4IO who made regular outdoor ventures to double/triple check the guys and general condition of the towers and antennae.

Bill VK4FW and I had a fun and challenging late evening/early morning working 160 meters into North America (Stateside) and Canada. It was hard work but we had two sets of headphones and “shared the joy” of pulling the signals out of the mud. It was particularly interesting to note that our own individual “internal DSPs” (i.e., our brains) would be tuning in on different signals in the receiver's bandpass; probably also a result of a difference in hearing bandwidth (tone deafness I think is the common parlance!). At one stage I swore I had copied a K6 station and Bill was chastising me for not logging the WA7 station – strangely, we were both correct. The 160 metre DX bug has definitely bitten.

As we entered the final couple of days of the DXpedition everyone was well into a routine and enjoying themselves. The weather was unfortunately still windy and overcast. I was operating on irregular intervals and with varied sleep patterns, waking up at all hours buzzing from the pileups the previous night. Various sessions were spent doing some 17 metre SSB work with very good (although sporadic) openings into W, VE and PY, but we had to contend with very heavy QSB and QRM from the CW station up the hill.

As we neared the end of the DXpedition I became more aware of the need for sleep if I was to operate the graveyard shifts. So, in good amateur tradition, I dragged Chris VK5CP to the local bar for a beer or 2 on more than one occasion—a sure-fire recipe to get some more sleep.

On the last evening the whole team took some time out and went out for dinner. A good meal of locally caught fish was enjoyed by all. It also presented an ideal opportunity for a debriefing of the operation to date with all team members agreeing the experience had been thoroughly rewarding and enjoyable.

(Continued on page 7)

Lord Howe Island DXpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 6)

The “take-down and pack up”

Due to the general concern about the weather a team decision was made to commence the “take-down” one day earlier than originally planned—this began on Wednesday 1st April. It was still windy and overcast, but very mild—around 24°C.

Given the windy conditions and requirement to have all the gear FULLY packed and sealed by nightfall on Thursday it was necessary to play on the safe side and get the towers and beams packed away. The bulk of the morning and early afternoon was spent taking down the towers and beams.

The afternoon was spent in the SSB shack listening to the operators work some 15 metres and later in the day 40 metres—as usual EU stations started coming in around 5pm local time.

At 8pm I wandered to the CW Camp where we ran the VK/ZL night and worked a bunch of locals on SSB and CW. It was great to hear so many familiar call signs and receive greetings from many VKs who knew various team members.

Then I listened with Bill on the 160 metres grayline to stateside. We worked 12 stations or so with varying signals and a few JAs and VEs thrown in for good measure. The antenna did quite a good job considering it was a ¼ wave 'L' at 80 feet with about 12 radials and proved itself to be a good performer. I spent a lot of time listening on 160 metres on this trip with the more experienced operators and am looking forward to getting a similar antenna up at my home location.

The final day prior to departure (Thursday 2nd April) was spent mostly dismantling the remaining antennae and equipment and getting it packed securely onto the pallets for return shipping to Brisbane.

The final day, Friday 3rd April was spent packing our personal luggage and relaxing prior to the flight back to Sydney. From memory I think that the flight was full and about 70% of the passengers were the VK9LA team; a good representation of a fine DXpedition.

Summary

Many people do not realize just how much planning, effort and cost goes into putting on a DXpedition. Our DXpedition leader Bill VK4FW spent countless days planning the event, contacting people, organising freight, sponsors, coordinating and generally making sure that the event was able to proceed. John VK4IO provided extensive assistance performing a three day dry-run of the antennae complement with Bill some weeks prior to the event. Once the



Packing up. Two pallets and two crates as well as the towers. Pictured (L-R) are VK4IO, VK3HJ and VK4FW

antennae (and towers) were configured, tuned and tested they were fastidiously packed and prepared ready with the rest of the equipment for shipping to LHI.

Without individual airfares (for the non-VK operators) taken into account I would estimate this DXpedition cost

(Continued on page 8)

Lord Howe Island Dxpedition—VK9LA (con'd)

(Continued from page 7)

in the order of \$50,000; with additional significant cost not being accounted for as much of the equipment was provided either by the operators, ODXG or our sponsors.

Arguably, this DXpedition occurred at the sunspot minima with virtually no sunspots for the 30 days preceding

QSO Statistics

Band	Total QSOs	CW	SSB	RTTY
160	627	627	0	0
80	3,347	1,496	1,851	0
40	9,111	6,001	3,110	0
30	4,458	3,857	1	601
20	6,714	3,084	1,194	1,194
17	3,579	2,377	1,202	0
15	2,158	1,235	660	263
12	161	160	1	
10	5	5	0	0
6	0	0	0	
Total	30,160	18,842	9,261	2,057

the DXpedition and the SFI not exceeding 68. This is reflected in the lack of QSOs on the higher bands.

More Statistics:

- o Shortest DX: 100 metres to VK9FLHI, Des (owner of the Blue Lagoon Lodge)!
- o Rarest DX: TL0Z on 40mtrs
- o Total DX Entities worked: 149
- o Total entities on CW: 119
- o Total entities on SSB: 125
- o Total entities on RTTY: 60

Epilogue....

I particularly want to thank the more experienced operators who mentored and advised me on how to handle the CW pileups—it was an invaluable learning experience—so thanks for all the support and encouragement to San K5YY, Bob N2OO and Bill VK4FW with an extra big thanks to ODXG and Bill, our DXpedition leader who made this trip possible. And it goes without saying that I extend my thanks to the rest of the team members who all helped make VK9LA a fantastic experience. This won't be my last DXpedition, but like so many experiences in life, the first is something special and will always be remembered. In fact, since this trip I have combined a holiday with a mini-DXpedition to Vanuatu as YJ0QB.

Thanks are also extended to our many sponsors, DX Associations and individual amateurs who supported this DXpedition. The larger sponsors are listed below, but *every single* organisation and individual who donated their time, money or equipment is gratefully acknowledged.

- o ICOM America
- o INDEXA
- o NCDXF
- o GDXF
- o Heil Sound
- o ACOM
- o TET-Emtron

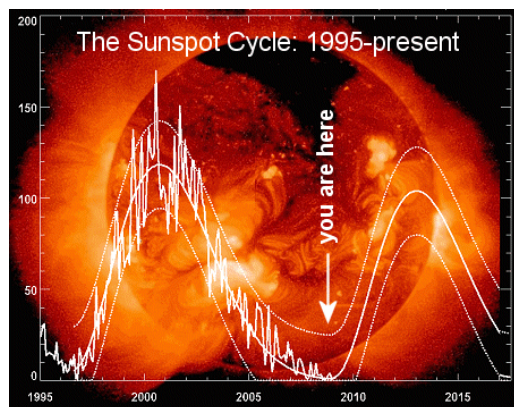
If you have ever wondered about a DXpedition and get the opportunity to join one, jump at it. Chances are you will have a truly memorable experience and become a far better radio operator, not to mention all the fun and enjoyment of spending time with like-minded people in a rare and exotic location. And the pile-ups can only be described as challenging, rewarding, satisfying and a bucket load of fun.

(Continued on page 9)

Lord Howe Island—VK9LA

Comments on the Sunspot Cycle

April 1, 2009: The sunspot cycle is behaving a little like the stock market. Just when you think it has hit bottom, it goes even lower.



The year 2008 was a bear. There were no sunspots observed on 266 of the year's 366 days (73%). To find a year with more blank suns, you have to go all the way back to 1913, which had 311 spotless days. Prompted by these numbers, some observers suggested that the solar cycle had hit bottom in 2008. Maybe not. Sunspot counts for 2009 have dropped even lower. As of March 31st, there were no sunspots on 78 of the year's 90 days (87%). It adds up to one inescapable conclusion: "We're experiencing a very deep solar minimum," says solar physicist Dean Pesnell of the Goddard Space Flight Center. "This is the quietest sun we've seen in almost a century," agrees sunspot expert David Hathaway of the Marshall Space Flight Center.

K7BV Returns to San Andres y Providencia



"The third time is a charm!" That's the hope of Dennis Motschenbacher, K7BV, as he returns to San Andres y Providencia to operate as 5J0BV from June 9 through June 23, 2010. Dennis is hopeful of giving the Deserving a 6 meter contact from this entity during the upcoming sporadic E propagation season.

In 2008, a customs inspection left an errant screw in the wrong place in his amplifier, putting it out of commission. In 2009, Dennis had to relocate four times to reduce RFI and reduce the "visual distraction" of his big, beautiful beam to keep his neighbors happy. Then "Murphy" found him again. This year, the smile you see on Dennis' face in last year's photo above will be from delight, we're sure!

THE QSL MAN® - W4MPY

Wayne Carroll

P. O. Box 73

Monetta, SC 29105

Phone/FAX (803) 685-7117

Web: www.qslman.com

DX World Guide by Franz Langner, DJ9ZB

ARRL Product Catalog: www.arrl.org/shop—\$25 + S/H (US)
1-888-277-5289 (US) 860-594-0335 (non-US)

Exciting DXpedition Videos!

Own six professionally-produced DVDs from TWELVE great adventures!



Flash!

Desecheo K5D DVD available now!

www.k4uee.com/dvd

Great for gifts, club meetings and introducing newcomers to DX!



Since 1989

QRZ DX Newsletter
Available each week by Regular Mail; Or, by email as a PDF file with Special Bulletins on late breaking DX news.



Since 1979

Six times a year, **The DX Magazine** Brings you stories about DXpeditions by those who were there and much more.

DX Publishing, Inc.
PO Box DX, Leicester, NC 28748
www.dxpub.com



Since 1991, ProLog has been the logging program of choice. For a features list, screenshots, reviews, user comments and secure ordering, visit us at:

WWW.PROLOG2K.COM

Datamatrix 5560 Jackson Loop, NE Rio Rancho NM 87124
Orders Only Please: 1-800-373-6564 Info: 1-505-892-5669

INDEXA POB 123 · Catawba, SC · 29704 · USA

The International DX Association

Annual Membership: \$20 U.S.

Support DX, participate in daily DX Info Session,
receive quarterly INDEXA newsletter

www.indexa.org



WWW.DAILYDX.COM